

# HECTOR CAFFERATA



## *Artist depiction of Fox Hill at Toktong Pass*

History refers to a particular confederation of GIs as veterans of “The Forgotten War,” a war that tested the very best America could field, both experienced and untried. They fought in horrible conditions and virtually froze to death on barren land that even God seemed to have abandoned. These ‘forgotten’ GIs withstood human wave assaults in which the legendary M-1 Garand lost favor to the trusty M-1 carbine simply because the carbine could chamber a 30 round banana clip with another 30 round clip taped its side for a quick exchange. More bullets meant a better chance at survival.

Statistics in war means a body count, human beings fighting and dying for their countries reduced to ‘statistics’ as if souls should be numbered

by cold-hearted bureaucrats. In Vietnam, on average, GIs perished at the rate of 5,800 per year. In “The Forgotten War” the average toll was 12,400 per year. Thus, we’re presented with the appalling ‘statistics’ of the Korean War.

Korean veterans are hard to find, especially for an interview, and when one is discovered it’s usually quite by accident. The clear-cut reason is the entrapment of being caught between a world war that demanded the unconditional surrender of our enemies and a war in Vietnam that was waged politically from a situation room at the White House.

Korea was our first ‘police action, politically correct, fears of escalation’ conflict that put American boys into Harm’s Way on distant real estate without a precise strategy for bringing them home. Indeed, American men and women are still engaged in Communist containment along the infamous 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. Yet the Korean War produced an abundance of heroes, from Pusan to Inchon to Pork Chop Hill, men who fought and died to save other men. This is one of their stories.



November 28, 1950:

Perhaps the epitome of a Marine recruitment poster, **Hector Cafferata** stood at 6’3” and weighed 220 pounds. Tall but stout, Cafferata played semipro football and had been an avid hunter since the age of 12. His strength and marksmanship would serve him well on the frozen tundra of Korea.

General Douglas MacArthur had ordered the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, about 20,000 strong, to

advance up the eastern side of Korea from Hugnang to the border with China. Notwithstanding, the Marines were skeptical of the military intelligence that implied the North Koreans were defeated and that the Chinese would not intervene on their behalf. To protect their escape route if needed, 246 Marines of Fox Company manned the rugged mountainside overlooking the narrow road at Toktong Pass.

MacArthur was wrong; the Marines were right. Near the Frozen Chosin, over 200,000 Chinese soldiers in 21 divisions swarmed into the Marines like an angry hive of hornets. Forced to retreat, or as a marine general claimed 'advancing in the opposite direction', the boys of Fox Company at Toktong Pass had to hold the turf to prevent a wholesale slaughter of their brothers.



**In temperatures at 30 degrees below zero**, Pfc. Hector Cafferata zipped up his sleeping bag around 1:30 am for potential slumber. His buddy,

Kenny Benson, was doing the same next to him while other Marines of Fox Company stood guard. Digging a foxhole was impossible in ground frozen brick hard so Cafferata and Benson hunkered down behind rocks and a pine tree windbreak. Suddenly the frigid air became a cacophony of 10,000 screaming Chinese firing weapons and throwing grenades as screeching bugles led them forward.

Cafferata grabbed his M-1 Garand and immediately shot 5 or 6 Chinese right in front of him. His buddy, Benson, was trying to put on his boots. Cafferata told Benson to forget about the darn boots and to return fire. Benson couldn't; his Browning Automatic Rifle was useless, frozen solid. An enemy grenade landed in front of their position. Benson picked up the grenade and tossed it away the exact moment it exploded. Blinded and his face burnt, Benson grabbed Cafferata's foot as they crawled to safety.

Finding 3 badly wounded Marines in a gully, Cafferata grabbed their M-1s and told the blinded Benson to keep loading as he kept firing. An M-1 carbine with a 30 round clip would have optimized his marksmanship, but the 8-shot Garands would have to do.

As Benson loaded the M-1s by feel, Cafferata kept firing at a seemingly endless horde of Chinese. Grenades fell from the black sky like a covey of baseballs. Cafferata recalled in 'War Tales' by Don Moore, "I was an awful baseball player, couldn't hit a bull in the butt with a baseball bat, but I whacked away a bunch of grenades with my entrenching tool as I kept firing."



**The Chinese, armed with sub-machine guns carrying 50-shot magazines and accompanied by squads of grenade throwers, kept coming in wave after wave.** Every member of Cafferata's squad was either wounded or dead. With the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon was on his left and 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon on his right; Cafferata was the only Marine holding down the middle.

This unwavering Marine held his ground for 7 hours. During the melee another grenade landed in front of Cafferata. He grabbed it and tossed the grenade away. It exploded upon release, blowing the flesh off his frozen fingers. Cafferata fought on. The wooden hand guard on one of his M-1s began to smolder from the rapid fire. The Chinese withdrew as daylight crept into another morning. Only then did Cafferata notice that he'd fought through the freezing night wearing only his shirt and socks.

Assuming the Chinese had fully retreated Pfc. Cafferata left the limited safety of the gully to retrieve his sleeping bag and boots. Several shots rang out. Cafferata's right arm was shattered and a round penetrated his chest. Evacuated due to multiple wounds, he was hospitalized for the next 18 months. At the time of the battle, Cafferata was 20 years old. Of the 246 Marines of Fox Company, less than 90 still stood after what ended up being a five day battle.

In 1952, while back home in New Jersey, Cafferata received a telegram stating that he'd been awarded the Medal of Honor. Cafferata told the Marines to mail it to him. The Commandant of the Marine Corps called Cafferata and let it be known in no uncertain terms that the President of the United States would be presenting the MOH and that Cafferata would 'get down here immediately'. President Harry Truman awarded Cafferata the Medal of Honor on November 24, 1952.

Partial wording from his decoration: ".....he maneuvered up and down the line and delivered accurate and effective fire against the onrushing force, killing 15, wounding many more, forcing others to withdraw....."

The officers recommending Cafferata for the Medal of Honor claimed 15 enemy soldiers were killed because they didn't think anyone would



believe the actual body count. Several witnesses verified the authentic count, as did 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon commander Lt. Robert C. McCarthy who told Cafferata, "We counted more than 125 bodies in front of your fighting position."

**MOH recipient Hector Cafferata** passed from this life on April 12, 2016. Our Korean War

veterans should never be referred to as “Forgotten.”